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# MUSIC OF THE MONTH

## A MYSTICAL TONE-POET

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

“THE sum total of his work has brought about an artistic revolution unequalled in the whole history of the arts. . . . He gives us a completely new system of harmony. Moreover, at the time of his death he was experimenting with the unification of the various arts of sound, light, and bodily movement; and, as if all this were not enough, he wove a system of philosophy into the art of his latest period.”

Who, the reader may well ask in some excitement, is this remarkable æsthetic revolutionist whose achievements are thus summarized by a distinguished British musicologist, Dr. A. Eaglefield Hull, Mus. Doc. (Oxon.) and editor of *The Monthly Musical Record* of London? The reader shall not be needlessly tortured: This extraordinary music-maker is none other than Alexander Nicolaievitch Scriabin, who was born at Moscow in 1872 and died there in his forty-fourth year, in the second spring of the Great War. The casual reader may think that Scriabin was young to have accomplished all that Dr. Hull and his other celebrants claim for him. But let it not be forgotten that Mozart wrote his first symphony when he was eight years old, and that when he died, in his thirty-sixth year, he had composed in all forty-seven symphonies. To be sure, most of them are negligible—a truth which is indicated (though not necessarily proved) by the fact that only three of the forty-seven remain in the concert repertoire. Nevertheless, Mozart was a very pretty fellow in his day. His life was nine years shorter than Scriabin's; so let us grant, at least as an hypothesis, that it was perfectly possible for Scriabin to accomplish all that Dr. Hull and others say that he did. At all events, it is clear that his work deserves consideration. He is to-day one of the most fashionable of modern

composers. His symphonic poems are heard in our concert-rooms with increasing frequency. It is said that in Russia he has pushed poor Tchaikovsky to the wall; and elsewhere in Europe his ghost disputes with Stravinsky the distinction of being the idol of *Les Jeunes*. We have not before discussed him in these pages; so let us now glance at certain aspects of his music—which, for our present purposes, shall be his orchestral works in their philosophical and æsthetic aspects; though his later piano pieces are worthy of special attention, and may tempt us to it at another time, in connection with an examination of what Dr. Hull calls his “revolutionary” technique.

Scriabin’s vogue in the Western world began about fifteen years ago, when Mr. Modest Altschuler and his Russian Symphony Orchestra (whose services in the cause of musical education have never been adequately acknowledged) performed Scriabin’s *Le divin Poème* in March, 1907. But it is only within the last decade that Scriabin has disclosed his full stature as a significant figure in contemporary music.

The later orchestral works of Scriabin cannot be fully apprehended unless it is borne in mind that for him they represented something much more than adventures in æsthetic expression. These last symphonic scores of his—*The Divine Poem*, *The Poem of Ecstasy*, and especially *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*—do not primarily aim (in Wagner’s phrase) at “the suscitng of pleasure in beautiful forms”. Nor are they “programme-music” in the more familiar sense of the term: music designed to convey those moods and emotions that are common to all men—joy, desire, passion, grief; the contemplation of nature, the delight of the senses in the beauty of the world. Scriabin intended these orchestral tone-poems as mystical rites, and we cannot meet him even half-way unless we try to understand his point of view, with as generous an attempt to grant his premises as we can achieve.

The essential fact to bear in mind is that Scriabin was a whole-hearted and uncompromising mystic, and that he regarded music as a vehicle for the transfer of religious experience (we are speaking of the mature Scriabin, not of the earlier composer of Chopinesque salon-music). He was dubbed by those about him “the Muscovite seer”; and his friends have testified that, for him, “Art and

Religion were one"—that he employed music as a means for "the expression of great inner truths". It was "the language in which he prophesied". Scriabin has been called a Theosophist, and undoubtedly he regarded himself as such. "He had made for himself," wrote Paul Rosenfeld in his *Musical Portraits*, "a curious personal religion, a bizarre mixture of Theosophy and Neoplatonism and Bergsonian philosophy,—a faith that prescribed transport; and these works [the symphonic poems] were in part conceived as rituals. They were planned as ceremonies of elevation and deification by ecstasy, in which performers and auditors engaged as active and passive celebrants. Together they were to ascend from plane to plane of delight, experiencing divine struggle and divine bliss and divine creativity. The music was to call the soul through the gate of the sense of hearing,—to lead it, slowly, hieratically, up through circle after circle of heaven, until the mystical gongs boomed and the mass-emotion reached the father of souls, and was become God."

Those whom Scriabin endorsed as his spokesmen have told us that he desired, like Wagner, to unite all the arts in the service of an ideal purpose. But in Scriabin's case this end was not "the perfect Drama, but the perfect Rite". In his *Prometheus* he intended that the "symphony of sounds" should be accompanied by "a symphony of color-rays"; and to that end he invented a keyboard instrument which he called a *Tastiéra per luce*, or *clavier à lumières*, by means of which effects of colored light were to be projected upon a screen, synchronizing with the progress of the music, and having a symbolic association with its expressional purposes. At the time of his death he was engaged upon a still more elaborate synthesis; a "Mystery", in which the music was to be associated not only with synchronous effects of light but with perfume and the dance as well. Thus "the secondary arts" (it has been explained) would enhance "the dominating arts—those subject to the will-power; symphonies of music, words, and gestures being accompanied by symphonies of color and light". In the projected "Mystery", no less than in the realized *Prometheus*, he endeavored to "do away with the barriers which divide the celebrants of the rite from those who are passively initiated (the onlookers and listeners), so that all shall experience the evolution

of the creative spirit. In this way, every art will be called into requisition in order to produce an ecstatic condition, affording a glimpse of the higher spiritual planes"—thus Mrs. Newmarch, who acted as interpreter for Scriabin's mystico-æsthetic doctrines when *Prometheus* was performed for the first time in London on February 1, 1913, and whose exegesis evidently had the approval of the composer, since he consented to its being reprinted unchanged at a subsequent performance of the work. Therefore we may assume that Mrs. Newmarch spoke with authority when she proceeded to set forth the meaning which the subject of *Prometheus* had for Scriabin in his tone-poem.

We are warned, at the start, that the legend of *Prometheus* as embodied in this work "differs very widely from the version with which we have been familiarized by Æschylus and Shelley":

The Promethean myth [Mrs. Newmarch continues] is much older than Hesiod, who relates it. It belongs, indeed, to the dawn of human consciousness. The design on the cover of the score is by M. Jean Delville, the leader of the Theosophist cult in Belgium, and shows us no ordinary conception of the Titan, "rock-riveted and chained in height and cold," with the vulture perpetually gnawing at his vitals, but one of that class of adepts symbolized at a much later date by the Greeks under the name of *Prometheus*. These "Sons of the Flame of Wisdom", who were closely allied with the purely spiritual side of man, were alone able to impart to humanity that sacred spark which expands into the blossom of human intelligence and self-consciousness.

According to the teaching of Theosophy, the nascent races of mankind, not yet illuminated by the Promethean spark, were physically incomplete, possessing only the shadows of bodies; sinless, because devoid of conscious personality—in Theosophical terms, "without Karma." From this condition they were liberated by the gift of *Prometheus*—the fire which awakened man's conscious creative power. But among those shadowy entities some were already more prepared to receive the spark than others. The more advanced understood the value of the gift, and used it on the higher spiritual planes. . . . The less highly organized turned it to gross material uses, involving suffering and evil. Thus the Promethean gift assumed a dual aspect: on the one hand it proved a boon, on the other, a curse.

We have here the elements of a fairly definite and infinitely varied psychological scheme: the crepuscular, invertebrate state of Karma-less humanity; the awakening of the will to create, in both its aspects; the strange moods of bliss and anguish which follow the acquisition of self-consciousness; probably, also, the last, fierce rebellion of the lower self preceding the final ecstasy of union, when the human mingles with the divine—with Agni, the fire which receives into itself all other sparks in the ultimate phase of development.

Thus it is evident that *Prometheus* is a work dealing with concepts far more elusive and esoteric than those which lie at the basis of even so thoroughgoing an example of "philosophical" music as Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. And this is equally true of his other orchestral tone-poems—*Le divin Poème* and *Le Poème de l'Extase*.

Let us turn, for a moment, to the forerunner of *Prometheus*, *Le Poème de l'Extase*. In this work, according to Mr. Altschuler,—who was the composer's intimate friend and confidant,—Scriabin "sought to express something of the emotional side of his philosophy. He was neither a Pantheist nor a Theosophist, although his creed contained elements common to both." According to Mr. Altschuler, the expressional scheme of *Le Poème de l'Extase* "may be divided into three connected parts: (1) His soul in the orgy of love. (2) The realization of a fantastic dream. (3) The glory of his own art."

But Dr. Hull says that "the basic idea of this fourth orchestral work of Scriabin is the Ecstasy of untrammelled action, the Joy in Creative Activity"; and he quotes the lines extracted by Scriabin from his literary *Poem of Ecstasy* and used as a motto for the *Fifth Sonata*, composed immediately after the symphonic poem:

I call you to life, O mysterious forces!  
Submerged in depths obscure  
Of the Creator Spirit, timid embryos of life,  
To you I now bring courage.

Attend, further, to Mr. Montagu-Nathan (in his *Contemporary Russian Composers*): In the *Poème de l'Extase*, he says, "the divine play of the soul reaches its apogee," and the music portrays "the spiritual movement of the soul . . . its struggle to obtain entrance into a state of energy describable as an orgy of creative activity. The soul, in an ecstasy, scorns achievement and rushes on towards the undertaking of further and mightier tasks. The soul here represents, we are told, the personal element evolving itself from the cosmic chaos."

Mr. Albert Coates has said that in the *Poème de l'Extase* "we find Scriabin's love of light. In the great climax representing the very height of ecstasy he had the picture in his mind of the human being, now freed from the fetters and trammels of everyday life,

standing on the mountain-tops, with arms flung wide and head thrown back, bathed in a radiant splendor of dazzling golden sunlight."

Now it will be obvious to those who are familiar with mystical thought that Scriabin's philosophy, as expounded by his spokesmen, is, as Theosophical doctrine, altogether spurious. For it is wholly at variance with the Theosophical categories, which are based upon the cardinal distinction between what St. Paul called "the psychic body"<sup>1</sup> and that other element of the human complex, "the spiritual body." Scriabin's philosophy, as it is quintessentialized and projected in his symphonic poems, is a curious blend of exalted emotionalism and voluptuous reverie. Of genuine spiritual rapture it has almost nothing. To view Scriabin as a true spiritual mystic is to misjudge his qualities.

But, happily, the music that results from his *état d'âme* is not dependent upon a philosophy for its effect. This music has an independent existence of its own; in and of itself, it communicates emotions that are purely æsthetic. Its truly rhapsodic power, its beauty that is both gorgeous and delicate, are inherent in the outgivings of Scriabin the musician, the master of an imaginative and eloquent tone-poetry. So that, even if one is loath to follow Scriabin the mystic and metaphysician along the difficult Path to that strange world the seers tell of, "the world at the back of the heavens," there remains the magician of tones who was, as Dr. Hull insists ("notwithstanding all his explainers and annotators"), the "champion of absolute music, music pure and simple. Read what you like into it". That will seem to many to be going rather too far. This music is undoubtedly a good deal more moving and impressive to those who bear in mind its special character as an expression of cumulative mystical ecstasy, than it could possibly be to those who chose to listen to it merely as a pattern of sound. Nevertheless, so divinely indulgent is the Goddess of Music, that she will yield to the listener almost anything he asks of her.

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<sup>1</sup> σῶμα ψυχικόν.